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ABSTRACT

Because social studies lacks the cognitive elegance of mathematics, the facilities and resources accorded to science, and the cadres of experts attending the language arts, it does not receive the recognition it deserves. The wide variety of academic disciplines included in the realm of social studies makes it very difficult for today's proponents to agree on a definition. However, one can begin by deducing the purpose of social studies from Paulo Freire's dictum "education is the practice of freedom." Based on this premise, the purpose of teaching is to develop autonomous beings capable of finding their own direction and meaning in life. Since freedom entails choices and decision making, teachers must provide real and simulated opportunities for decision making and policy formation. Education should develop persons capable of autonomously knowing, feeling, striving, and acting upon what they know and value. Because social studies impinges upon all of these four spheres, its mission is central to the ultimate purpose of education. (LH)

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What Is Social Studies?

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Social studies is the Cinderella of the school curriculum. Lacking the cognitive elegance of mathematics, the facilities and resources accorded to science, and the cadres of experts attending the language arts, Cinderella subsists, hand to mouth, as best she can. Cinderella does have a number of secret and powerful admirers: namely anthropology, economics, geography, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology. But, alas, these admirers spend so much time impressing one another with their monopolistic claims on her attention, that Cinderella is forgotten in the process. How can we restore Cinderella to her rightful place in the Kingdom of Learning?

Finding a Definition

Anarchy by consensus

Present-day conceptions of social studies are an incoherent mish-mash of the cognate academic disciplines: anthropology, geography, history, and so forth. With so many actors involved, each having a unique mission, it becomes very difficult for the proponents of social studies to get their act together. The mere cognitive burden of doing so already surpasses that of the other more discrete school subjects such as mathematics and literature, since familiarity with the entire academic gamut of social-science disciplines is called for. To require such an informing synthesis from the beleaguered classroom teacher of social studies is simply unrealistic—unless we expect that teacher to be an Aristotle or an Immanuel Kant.

How then, can social studies teachers get their act together?

A deductive approach

Deductive reasoning is generally held to be easier than inductive reasoning, as erudition in specifics is not required. Inductive reasoning, on the other hand, can be no more cogent than the quality of one's erudition about a given matter. Deduction enables us to proceed rapidly from general principles without becoming mired in the merits and demerits of myriad sets of particulars. In essence, induction requires grounding in consensually validated data concerning *particulars*; whereas, deduction requires grounding in first *principles* that have been agreed upon.

If deduce we must, where shall we begin?

Starting with the ultimate purpose of education

Here, we are at a certain advantage, because most of us do not want to quarrel about "motherhood." We are likely to agree on a number of fundamental issues; for example, that knowledge serves us and not vice versa. If that is so, our prime objective as social studies teachers is not to turn out political scientists, historians, or geographers. We could, at this point, review the history of ideas, from Plato to Comenius to Dewey, and consider the implications of various pivotal notions for the praxis (theory and practice) of social studies. Fortunately for us, the best ideas of the ancient thinkers have been incorporated into those of later thinkers. Indeed, I believe that one contemporary 20th century educator has said it all in a pithy one-liner that is the ultimate of ultimates. His name is Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian priest who has been persecuted for his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. His dictum is simply:

Education is the Practice of Freedom

Implications of Freire's Dictum for Social Studies

A number of subsidiary principles can be deduced from this dictum:

- *Doing* is more important than merely *knowing* about something. Ideally one should act upon one's knowledge.
- Education is not a preparation for life. It is life. The classroom does not merely prepare one for social life. It is already a microcosm of social life. The classroom is the students' first-hand source of data for learning about society and how best to interact with it.
- Freedom entails choices and decision-making. To decide is to *prefer* one choice or alternative over another. A *value* is thereby entailed. But choosing and acting intelligently require a knowledge of alternatives and their implications, i.e., a means for testing and evaluating the consequences of choices.

Given these considerations, as teachers we are in the business of developing autonomous beings capable of finding their own *direction* and *meaning* in life. Directional questions are, by definition, questions of worth or value. Such questions are not to be addressed squarely by school systems; nevertheless they are inescapable. Directional questions are always prior to technical questions. *Where?* is prior to *How* do we get there? *Where we go* shapes what we take along with us and what we do en route. To think otherwise is to confuse means with ends.

The business of dealing with direction or values is, of course, *politics*. For classroom teachers, the operational side of *politics* entails providing our students with real and simulated opportunities for decision-making and policy-formation. Decision-taking and policy-making are high order cognitive objectives that presuppose lower order cognition. The optimal roles of the various social-science disciplines readily fall into place, given this Freirean "political" perspective. Policy-making obviously has to be informed if choices are to be intelligent and meaningful. Geography can disclose the environmental givens (*What do we have to work with?*), thus providing one kind of grounding in reality. History apprises us perhaps of similar, or analogous, decisions from the past so as to provide models for emulation or avoidance. Anthropology, sociology, and psychology inform us of the nature of the beings that we are dealing with and their cultural milieu, thus rendering our needs assessment more accurate. Political science also provides models for study, as well as procedures for orderly decision-making.

Our Freirean organizing perspective implies that the "subjects" serve the student and not vice versa—that higher order objectives of problem-solving and decision-making replace the otherwise mindless meandering through a maze of information regarding dates, people, places, products, customs, procedures, and so forth.

These higher order skills already imply the application of knowledge, hypothesis-testing, and critical thinking. More important, high order decision-making skills are learned through the *experience* of *responsibility* in making actual and simulated decisions.

A true practice of freedom soon teaches us to respect one another's right to free choices and to hear one another with empathy.

Educated folk have had, for a long time, the cognitive knowledge to solve the world's problems, but mere *spectator knowledge* is not enough. We have not had the know-how to organize one another to apply this knowledge in socially useful ways. Only by moving through the spheres of knowing, feeling/valuing, willing, and doing (the cognitive, affective, connotative and experiential domains, respectively), can we tentatively approach the educational summit that Paulo Freire has so tersely, but aptly, fingered for us.

The Mission of Social Studies

Clearly, social studies has a contribution to make to the development of persons capable of autonomously knowing, feeling, striving, and acting upon what they know and value. If striving for meaning is the loftiest of cognitive objectives, then striving to love is the highest affective objective. We do not live by bread alone, but by our highest meanings—be they conscious or unconscious. In a psychological sense, we are the world. The world is an embodiment of our collective meanings.

In a nutshell, the purpose of social studies is to help a child make sense of the world and his/her own reality so that he/she can find the most appropriate place in it, in a way that maximizes the flowering of the total person consistent with maximizing that person's potential contribution to society.

The following remarks are excerpted from a statement produced by a student-teacher who was asked to derive the mission of social studies from Paulo Freire's dictum—that education is the practice of freedom.

> . . . The goal of social studies is to create a responsible member of the human family, who through his own actions and conscious choices contributes to the dignity and worth of man. Social studies provides him with an arena and the ingredients:
>
> • to make sense out of his immediate and personal world, so as to give meaning to his personal strivings.
> • to see his relatedness to his immediate community, as well as to mankind as a whole whereby both his uniqueness and universality may be cherished, and to realize that the love of mankind is a higher goal than self-love.
> • to discover and develop his own competencies, attitudes and values for charting his own course through life.
> • to contribute to the betterment of social institutions and evolvement of mankind as a whole, after having gained a useful grasp of the course and context of human events and the realization that the freedom and security of any group of people is predicated upon the responsible freedom and security of all peoples. After all, is not the earth one country and mankind its citizens?
>
> *Valerie Burgess*
> *UVic Class of '82*

Other student-teachers working from Freire's dictum produced statements similar in many respects to the foregoing. By way of contrast, another group of students were asked to formulate a mission for social studies from their knowledge of specific, related, subject-disciplines. The statements that emerged were highly specialized, but bore little relationship to one another. Truly, deduction is easier for a group than is induction.

Social Studies in Relation to the Other School Subjects

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that social studies is not an end in itself, but a vehicle to the larger goal of education—as the practice of freedom. But note how *central* the mission of social studies is to the ultimate purpose of education. The same can be said of no other subject!

Indeed it is the mission of social studies that is *subserved* by the *tools* such as *literacy*, *numeracy*, *graphicacy*, and so forth that are developed in the other "subjects." We learn to read so that we can understand and act upon the things of worth that arise in social studies. Mathematics and science do not treat questions of worth at all, and they shed no light on choosing, decision-making, and acting. Social studies utilizes the methods of all the other subjects and has methods of its own as well. Only social studies impinges upon all the four spheres of knowing, valuing, striving, and doing. The other subjects are "alphabet" subjects. Alphabets are not ends in themselves but segments of the higher synthesis that social studies provides.

Oh Cinderella, when will your sisters recognize your true value?